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## THE PRESENTATION OF INTERURBAN PROBLEMS TO THE PUBLIC

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It is generally recognized by street railway men and financiers that the success or failure of an interurban project depends largely upon the effectiveness of the appeal which the line makes to the public. The publicity problems of the interurban are so peculiar and vary so between different localities as to require the highest order of ability on the part of the publicity manager in their presentation. While almost every other part of the electric railway field has been reduced to standards, having a general application under all conditions, the field of publicity still remains intensely individual.

The technique of operation and the rules and regulations enforced upon the various railways are happily coming to a common basis. The operating official from one line, on joining forces with another interurban road, soon finds himself acquainted with the methods of his neighbor.

Publicity plays a most important part in the success of an electric railway. Not only must it be relied upon to stimulate and develop passenger, freight and express traffic, but it is generally recognized that it is the most potent weapon in the possession of the railway to secure a satisfactory solution of the most vital of present day interurban problems—how to secure a satisfactory return upon this class of investments.

When electricity came into being as the motive force for trolley cars it was the belief of many that the cost of doing business would be greatly below what eventualities have proven possible. In the optimism that prevailed it was widely believed that the only thing to be done was to substitute motors for horses and string up a few wires, and so save the cost of feeding, the cost of care, the heavy depreciation resulting from the short life of the animal power, besides gaining much in the way of speed. The interurban lines of

the older companies were at first nothing more than extensions of city lines, and were intended as feeders to the town or city service. In building these lines out into the country every political division of territory, such as villages and townships, had to be dealt with separately, each giving a right to operate only through its own territory and each making its own local rate of fare. The township of A had nothing in common with the township of B, nor was B in the least concerned with the proposed relationship between the interurban line and the municipality of C. What each wanted was a service from farm to farm, or from farm to town, with local stops wherever the passenger might be. Perhaps I should not have said what each wanted, because in many cases the attitude was merely one of toleration, with much doubt as to whether the new-fangled mode of locomotion would be successful, and still greater doubt whether it would not be an actual detriment to the public good.

In almost all fields of commercial endeavor, and more especially where the product is to be consumed—as for instance in the making of gas—it is reasonably easy to fairly determine at the outset the cost of production. The interurban railway man, unable at the beginning to determine the cost of a ride, calculated it to be less than it has proven to be, with the result that he has been selling cheaper than he should. Not only were the pioneers in the field of electric interurban transportation deceived in the belief that the mysterious application of electricity would cut the cost of transportation to almost nil, leaving great profits from rates that have since proven to be ridiculously low and not sufficient to make any returns upon the original investments, but the development of the business has added greatly to the burden of the carrier.

Bearing in mind the original intent of these interurban lines—the giving of purely local interurban service—and following the development down to the present day, this burden can be easily appreciated. Horse cars were fitted with motors, then it was found necessary to build larger cars to carry these motors with any degree of safety, and then the larger and stronger car body needed more powerful motors to obtain any degree of speed and guarantee any certainty of service. For the public convenience in the local service the tracks were laid upon the highways twisting and dipping with the roads. These tracks were at first cheaply constructed of thin

bands of iron upon light cross ties laid in the mud. As the cars grew in size and the tracks pushed their way farther into the country to distant settlements it was found that the location of the tracks upon the highways was not fitting for the new service demanded. The highways were too narrow, poorly drained and lacked proper gradients. As the country settled up, largely as a result of the convenience of the new method of transportation, the highways became overcrowded and so new tracks of heavier rails and with proper gradients had to be built upon private right of way purchased at growing prices, because of the enhanced values made by the very presence of the interurban lines. And so the thing has gone on, until to-day we find rails as heavy as on the best steam roads, large, powerful, palatial cars, bigger power houses and more intricate overhead equipment, greater frequency of service, and a speed of operation undreamed of in the earlier days. Type after type of equipment has been discarded, as the result of the progress of invention, before it has had an opportunity of earning its life's value.

In spite of all these things, however, and of the increase in the cost of material and in the operating expenses, the old contractual relations as to the rates of transportation, and the police regulations are still in existence. Under the glow of expectations the interurban lines have spread their network of tracks, but now the glamor has died away; the builders are not so anxious to find places to which to go as are the people to have them build. The cold douche of experience has checked the ardor of the financial world until such time as the man who rides more fully understands what it costs the other man to make the ride possible.

And to understand this is difficult without study. The man who wants to ride knows that the man who makes possible the ride has in times past offered a ride to other people at a certain price, and he looks with doubt upon the claim that there must be a new deal. He forgets that the ride he wants is not the ride of the years that are past.

That there is a difference is the one great interurban problem of traffic to be presented to the public. And how is it to be presented? By publicity in all that the word means. The American public is not only fair-minded; it is generous, but it does not desire to be hood-winked nor cheated. It does not wish to purchase its

wares at a price, knowing it means ruin, because it realizes that such a condition leads to a shoddy article, whether that article be a coat or a car ride. It is equally true that the American public has no stomach to pay more than a just price.

Now all this information can be given by the interurban lines by specific history and tables of costs and revenues, but above all what is needed is a scientific study and consideration of the whole matter, without prejudice, by the people themselves. The company that cannot stand the white light of publicity, which must come sooner or later, will be obliged to purge itself and confess its sins before repentance is believed. As I said, however, in the beginning, these problems differ somewhat in different communities. What I have pointed out concerns more particularly the interurban lines early in the field, for from the pioneer work in Michigan others have profited.

The second important duty of the publicity department is to bring home to the public the immense advantages which have been conferred upon them by the interurban lines. People are so used to taking for granted new changes and improvements that in a few months, or years, they forget the conditions which prevailed before these changes came into existence. Out of this forgetfulness grows a large amount of the apathy which is responsible for the failure of electric railways to secure just changes, when they become necessary.

While the interurban railway builder and operator has been learning his lesson of cost the benefits to the public served have grown apace. In the great interurban railway centers like Indianapolis, Toledo, Cleveland, and Detroit the people, through the constant use of the country trolley for business and pleasure, have gained a better understanding of farm life. These men of the city do not look upon the farmer as the joke "Hey, Rube," but as the man who feeds us all. They do not look with pitying glances on the man with the hoe, but rather are envious of the man of broad acres who, with the modern machinery at his command, has as it were but to press the button and watch the land come to life with the fruits of the soil. The farm is not the thing the city man wants to shun; it is the reverse, for deep in his heart is the hope that some day he, too, will be able to retire to his own acre of peace and plenty.

Similarly those of the farm and village have been brought into close and kindly touch with the city. They know the stores, they know the parks, they are even not unacquainted with the latest play. The farmer is no longer obliged to spend two or three days of his own time and that of his team in the task of marketing his produce at a price unknown until delivery is made, but to-day, through the agency of the interurban trolley that makes possible an extensive system of rural delivery of mail, the farmer gets his daily newspaper, knows early the price he can get for his product, places his product on an interurban express car, follows himself by passenger car, and in as many hours as it formerly took days he makes his sales and his purchases.

Much of the opposition to the interurban railway has come from the villages, under the belief that a frequent service would spell mercantile ruin, and here and there this opposition still exists. I quote from a recent edition of the Birmingham (Michigan) "Eccentric," to show the change:

"When the trolley was first established it was claimed it would ruin the smaller towns, the reverse is true. Look over the following census figures and you will note that every town in Oakland county not reached by an electric road has been steadily on the toboggan for the past twenty years. On the other hand, towns having an hourly service or less have held their own or shown only a slight increase, while the section served by the Pontiac line, with its thirty- and twenty-minute service, has absorbed more than the actual net increase in the county."

The truth is the interurban line is not a deterrent, but an aid to the small town. It does not of necessity cause all towns to become manufacturing centers, but it does give them better facilities to become such. The interurban line modernizes the trading post, giving the country merchant the same ease in making his purchases as has the corner store keeper in the city, and the same privilege of making these purchases as he wants them and in the quantities he wants. There is no longer the necessity of stocking up for the winter because of impassable road conditions. To-day the interurban grocery delivers to its customers strawberries just as early in the season as does the city grocery.

Before the advent of the interurbans the course of trade was from the village to the city. To-day it runs equally from city to

village as from village to city. Making use of the interurban car for his pleasure trip out into the country, the city man picks up his bargains in the way of butter and eggs and even in staple groceries. A full lunch basket out into the country means a full basket of supplies back into the city.

All these things can be brought home to the fair-minded public old boundary limits of business and pleasure have been abandoned and new ones made further out, just as far as the streaks of steel reach. Where such a space-eating and comfort-bringing institution prevails the outside man must treat his trolley line as his good friend and servant. He must realize that it is not a political institution and that it must not be made a political football. He must realize that it affords him so many conveniences; that of the many necessities he has to-day it would be one of the last he would abolish, and finally he must realize that enough must be paid for the service to make it efficient and give a decent return to the capital invested.

All these things can be brought home to the fair-minded public through effective publicity. If this is done, the public is constantly reminded that the interurban railway is in reality a partnership between them and a set of stockholders; that the stockholders receive their return in the form of dividends, while the public receives its return in the form of good service and all the advantages which this brings with it. If this idea can be firmly implanted in the public mind, and if, in addition, it can also be shown that good service is not possible without satisfactory financial conditions, the publicity man has won his fight and incidentally placed his road upon an assured financial footing.